

# Mount Vernon Circle Environmental Assessment



January 8, 2004



## Public Meeting

Welcome to the third public meeting for the Mount Vernon Circle Environmental Assessment (EA) study, scheduled for Thursday, January 29, 2004 from 6:30 pm to 8:30 pm at Walt Whitman Middle School in Alexandria, Virginia. This EA has been prepared to address the parking and traffic safety needs in the vicinity of George Washington's Mount Vernon Estate and Gardens (Mount Vernon) at the southern end of the George Washington Memorial Parkway in Fairfax County, Virginia.

There will be a short presentation at 7:00 p.m., which will provide an overview of the project and present the preferred parking and trail alternatives. Forms for written comments will be provided to citizens attending the meeting, and representatives of the National Park Service (NPS) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) will be available to discuss the project. Citizens also will have an opportunity to make statements and to ask questions in a public forum. Information regarding alternatives, existing conditions, and previous public meeting comments is available on FHWA's web site, <http://www.evl.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/nepa/index.htm>.

## Executive Summary

An EA has been prepared to address the parking, traffic, and safety needs of visitors, residents, and pedestrians in the vicinity of Mount Vernon located at the south end of the George Washington Memorial Parkway (GWMP). The FHWA and the NPS performed this study in coordination with the VDOT, Fairfax County, the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association (MVLA) and the Stakeholders Participation Panel (SPP), a citizen's group formed to review and discuss the project's progress. The process first defined the purpose and need, evaluated existing conditions, and then introduced general parking and trail concepts. Following two public meetings (June 26, 2002 and January 21, 2003) and seven SPP meetings, a Preferred Build Parking Alternative and Preferred Trail Improvement Alternative were recommended for analysis in addition to a No Build Alternative. The final EA report includes background information on the project, details of existing conditions, and an evaluation of the alternatives' impacts.



## Purpose and Need

The purpose of this project is to provide improvements (including parking, roadway, sidewalks, and multiuse trails) to accommodate current and planned demand for parking, improve traffic operations, and enhance the safety of pedestrians, motorists, and cyclists in the vicinity of Mount Vernon.

Project need is based on several cumulative factors.

- Analysis of existing conditions shows that a deficiency currently exists for parking during periods of peak visitation.
- At certain times, pedestrians must cross congested roads to access Mount Vernon from the existing parking areas.
- Recent and planned expansion and renovations to Mount Vernon will lead to changes in visitor and pedestrian patterns, including increases in parking demand.
- Frequent use of the Circle as an overflow parking lot impacts the cultural landscape of Mount Vernon and the GWMP.

Goals and objectives for the project include:

- Increase parking capacity for visitors to Mount Vernon
- Improve pedestrian and multiuse trail connectivity in the immediate area of Mount Vernon.
- Enhance pedestrian, motorist, and cyclist safety.
- Coordinate with other studies and agencies (including Fairfax County and Virginia Department of Transportation [VDOT]).
- Provide extensive opportunities for public involvement.
- Coordinate with NPS management plans for the GWMP.
- Eliminate the parking in the Circle

## Study Process

The EA process is designed to determine the environmental impacts of the alternatives that meet the project purpose and need. The process began by first defining the purpose and need. The next step involved evaluating existing conditions, and then introducing general parking and trail concepts to the public. These general concepts were developed into several specific alternatives that were evaluated to determine the best candidates for further study.

The initial alternatives were refined and narrowed to final alternatives, which were studied in detail to determine possible environmental, cultural, and community impacts. Finally, one preferred alternative was selected based on the environmental analysis and public input.

## Parking Alternatives Evaluated

Six general parking alternative concepts were presented at the June 26, 2002 public meeting, including new parking lots, expanded or reconfigured existing parking lots, shuttle buses, and off-site parking. Following input from the first public meeting, new parking on Mount Vernon property behind the west wall was included for consideration. Twelve alternatives were presented to the SPP in October 2002. In consultation with the SPP, NPS, and MVLA, these alternatives underwent several rounds of revisions, culminating in the four parking alternatives presented at the January 21, 2003 public workshop and recommended for further evaluation. During the public meeting, the SPP recommended the addition of a fifth alternative to be studied further. Citizens at the meeting also requested that further analysis be done on alternatives other than those recommended, including parking demand management and increased use of shuttle buses. Based on response from the January public meeting, a more detailed evaluation was developed that included all 12 alternatives, plus three additional alternatives. Five final parking alternatives were presented to the SPP on April 16, 2003. At that time, the SPP, MVLA, NPS, and FHWA reached a consensus on the preferred parking alternative and a preferred trail alternative. The following section describes the alternative evaluation process in more detail.

## Alternative Evaluation Process

An iterative process of translating these concepts into physical improvements involved detailed data gathering of existing conditions, detailed definition, and analysis of the needs for the action. Engineering considerations included access, geometric design for proper operations, and construction and maintenance costs. Environmental considerations included potential effects on Park land, air quality, noise levels, wetlands, visual quality, and vegetation. The preliminary concepts were subjected to three level screening processes. The concepts that did not meet (or could not be modified to meet) the project's purpose and

need were eliminated from further consideration. Next, the remaining alternatives were refined and evaluated for engineering feasibility and general environmental impacts. The concepts that were assessed to be difficult to construct and maintain, did not meet the NPS's management goals for the GWMP, or had disproportionate environmental impacts were dropped. Finally, the remaining concepts were evaluated.

## **Alternatives Considered and Eliminated**

*Phase 1- Does Not Meet Project Purpose and Need*  
Shuttle Bus Service (Concept Recommended by the SPP): The additional cost to purchase, operate, and maintain shuttle bus service along with off-site parking would be cost prohibitive. Shuttle parking is not feasible for all 290 spaces needed, and is not convenient for visitors.

Metro Rail Extension (Concept Recommended by the SPP): Extending MetroRail from Huntington Metro Station to Mount Vernon would be cost prohibitive and would not meet the projected demand.

Parking Demand Management: This alternative, which was suggested during the second public meeting, would require visitors to purchase tickets on-line or drive to Mount Vernon, purchase tickets, and wait for the ticketed time. This system potentially discourages visitors from visiting Mount Vernon.

*Phase 2 - Agency Concerns and Community Impacts*  
The alternatives that were strongly opposed by the community, not consistent with the missions of NPS or MVLA, or had serious environmental impacts were dropped from further consideration.

Parking structures on existing East Parking Lot and on Mount Vernon Property: The alternatives that involved parking structures presented higher construction and maintenance costs and security concerns.

Alternatives with realignment of Route 235 North, East and West of its existing alignment: Any realignment of Route 235 was perceived as a bypass and was strongly opposed by the community. A parking lot requiring the realignment of Route 235 North would most likely have a driveway into the existing Route 235 Parking Lot, which services Mount Vernon visitors and post office patrons, and would negatively impact users of the post office. Additional traffic onto Route 235 West at the existing driveway for that lot would have a negative impact on traffic safety. These alternatives also have a higher cost due to the realignment of Route 235 North.

## *Phase 3 - Resource Impacts*

The alternatives that preliminary analyses showed would impact natural resources to an unacceptable level, or were inconsistent with other planned improvements, were dropped from further consideration.

Parking expansion only on NPS property: Any parking expansion beyond that required for removal of parking provided on the Circle was considered as excessive by NPS and contrary to the agency's mission. A new parking lot in this location would result in a longer walk for pedestrians from the parking lot to the entrance gate than many of the other alternatives. The proposed alternative would require an additional entrance off Route 235 North, which the community opposed.

Parking expansion only on Mount Vernon property behind the wall: The alternative conflicts with MVLA plans. In addition, traffic would be increased along Route 235 West, potentially resulting in a negative impact on traffic safety. The proposed alternative would have sight distance issues due to the existing bus parking provision along Route 235 West. Expanding all parking behind the wall would involve security and traffic management issues for MVLA. The wall currently provides security and channels all visitors through the main gate or another checkpoint. With major parking expansion behind the wall, it would be difficult to maintain security and to channel visitors to Mount Vernon's main gate.

## Alternatives Considered and Retained

After the initial analysis of the preliminary concepts, the remaining build concepts were refined to three specific build alternatives. These were presented to the public at the January 21, 2003 meeting.

Parking Alternative 1: New Parking Lot on Mount Vernon property west of Route 235. This alternative provides a single additional parking lot on Mount Vernon property west of existing Route 235 North. The parking lot would have access on both Route 235 North and West. The access from Route 235 West would be consolidated with the existing post office parking lot. A new access point would be required from Route 235 North, which would have sight distance limitations due to sharp horizontal and vertical curves. The community opposes any new entrances on Route 235 North due to safety concerns and proximity to the residential neighborhoods.

Parking Alternative 2: Expand East and West Parking Lots. The alternative would provide approximately 260 spaces in the expanded West Parking Lot and 30 spaces in the East Parking Lot. Visitors would access the parking lot expansions through existing driveways. The alternative retains the existing parking and traffic patterns and remains attractive due to minimal changes in walking distance. However, this alternative has disproportionate impacts on NPS resources and conflicts with NPS goals.

Parking Alternative 3: Expand West Parking Lot and expand employee parking lot behind the wall on Mount Vernon property for overflow parking. The proposed alternative would expand the existing West Parking Lot with 150 spaces and provide an additional 140 parking spaces in the employee parking lot behind the wall. Visitors would access the overflow parking area through the existing Mount Vernon employee lot. The proposed alternative would accommodate the parking currently accommodated on the Circle in the expanded West Parking Lot. The overflow parking provided in the employee parking lot would be convenient to the visitors due to the proximity of this lot to the main gate. The alternative provides security challenges for MVLA due to the mix of visitor and employee parking in the same lot.

Parking Alternative 4: No-Build Alternative. A No-Action alternative was developed to serve as the baseline against which all other alternatives will be compared. The No-Action alternative provides no additional parking spaces or improvements to pedestrian, motorist, or cyclist safety.

Following the public meeting, Alternative 3 was modified to create a fourth build alternative.

Expand West Parking Lot and construct overflow parking lot behind the wall on Mount Vernon property west of Route the employee lot. This alternative would expand the West Parking Lot by 150 spaces and construct an overflow parking lot on Mount Vernon property behind the wall to accommodate 140 spaces. The overflow lot would be located in the field west of the employee lot, with a new driveway onto Route 235 West. Since the overflow lot would not be a part of the existing employee lot, this alternative does not provide the same security issues as Alternative 3.

## Trail Alternatives Considered

In addition to new parking, this project also includes a proposal to connect Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail (also Interstate Route 1 Bikeway) along Mount Vernon Memorial Highway (Route 235) with the Mount Vernon Trail. The new trail connection begins at the north end of the East Parking Lot and joins with the existing trail on the west side of the Circle. The following alternatives were developed and presented at the January 21, 2003 public meeting.

### Preliminary Alternatives

Alternative A: This alternative crosses over the GWMP north of the circle and connects with the existing Mount Vernon Trail generally west of the post office.

Alternative B: This alternative extends the existing trail generally east of the East Parking Lot along the existing brick wall and joins with the existing sidewalk on the south side of the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway.

Alternative C: This alternative crosses the GWMP north of the circle as in Alternative A, and then carries along the north side of the West Parking Lot, connecting with the existing trail at the intersection of Route 235 North and Route 235 West.

Alternatives A and C were found to have major impacts on the GWMP and also raised community concerns; therefore, they were dropped from further consideration. Alternative B was modified as two options.

### Alternative B Options

Alternative B was found to be generally acceptable to the community and affected agencies. The following options of Alternative B were developed:

Alternative B1: This alternative runs between the GWMP and the East Parking Lot, and along the inside of the circle.

Alternative B2: This alternative runs between the wall and the East Parking Lot, and crosses over to the inside of the circle at the south end of the East Parking Lot as in Alternative B1.

Alternative B1 Modified: Alternative B1 was modified following further evaluation for pedestrian, cyclists, and automobile conflicts. This alignment remained along the outside of the circle. This alignment reduces safety concerns by separating pedestrians and cyclists from the vehicular traffic.

### Public Involvement

Two public meetings were held on June 26, 2002 and January 21, 2003. Comment forms distributed at the January 2003 public meeting provided an opportunity for participants to choose which, if any, of the alternatives they preferred. Those alternatives are described below with the percentage of participants who favored them. A more detailed meeting summary is available online at FHWA's web site.

### Parking Alternatives Preference

- Parking Alternative 1: Construct a new parking lot on Mount Vernon property west of Route 235 (5%)
- Parking Alternative 2: Expand East and West Parking Lots; construct a new overflow parking lot on Mount Vernon property west of Route 235 (3%)
- **Parking Alternative 3: Expand East and West Parking Lots; expand the existing employee lot on Mount Vernon property behind the wall south of Route 235 to accommodate overflow parking (63%)**
- Parking Alternative 4: “No-Build” Alternative (29%)

### Trail Improvement Alternatives Preference

- Trail Alternative A: Cross Parkway with bridge, follow existing trail to Route 235, cross Route 235, and continue past post office (2%)
- **Trail Alternative B: Continue from end of existing trail through parking lots and around Circle to Route 235 (92%)**
- Trail Alternative C: Cross Parkway with bridge, stay behind West Parking Lot to Route 235 near the Circle (6%)

The document *A Response to General Questions* addresses citizens' questions at the meeting. The alternative evaluation process is described more fully in the *Environmental Assessment*, and a comprehensive environmental analysis table was completed for all previously considered alternatives. All of these documents will be available on FHWA's web site.



## Preferred Build Parking Alternative

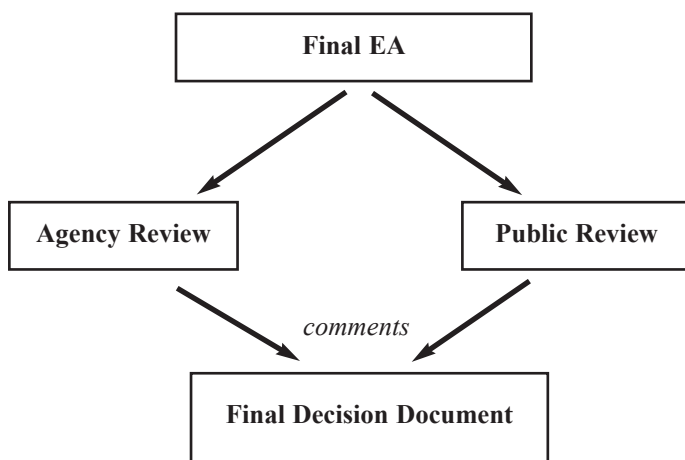
The Preferred Build Parking Alternative (shown on the site plan), which is compared with the No-Build Alternative in the EA, includes an expansion of the West Lot by 150 spaces and a 140-space overflow lot on Mount Vernon property behind the wall west of the employee lot. The preferred alternative is a variation of Alternative 3 which was presented at the January public meeting, and received approval of a majority of responses. Changes from the original design include expansion of the West Lot only, rather than both East and West Lots, and location of the overflow lot in the west field behind the Mount Vernon wall rather than next to the employee parking lot. The No-Build Alternative has fewer impacts, but does not meet the project purpose and need. The preferred alternative is the environmentally preferred build alternative.

## Preferred Trail Alternative

The Preferred Trail Improvement Alternative is a variation of Alternative B that was presented at the January public meeting. The trail extension begins at the termination point of the existing multi-use trail at the north end of the East Lot. The trail then continues south, running between the East Lot and the GWMP, meandering to avoid large trees. At the East Lot entrance, the trail moves onto the road around the south side of the traffic circle. Along the traffic circle, the trail is distinguished by its texture and color. At the bus loading area, bollards separate the bus lane from trail users.

## Next Steps

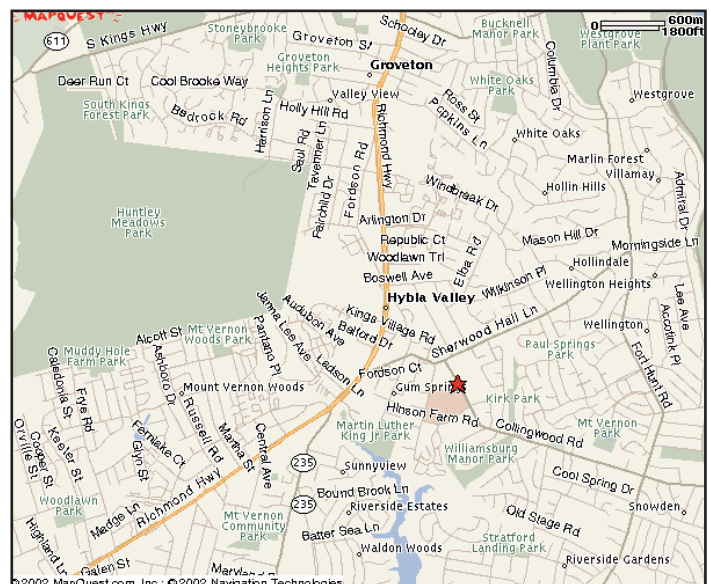
Following the public meeting, the Environmental Assessment process will conclude along the following steps:



Your verbal and written comments are requested. Comments may be presented at the meeting, in writing following the meeting, or sent to the FHWA after the meeting. Written comments will be accepted electronically at the following email address: [jack.j.vandop@fhwa.dot.gov](mailto:jack.j.vandop@fhwa.dot.gov), or may be mailed to:

Jack Van Dop  
Project Director, FHWA  
Eastern Federal Lands Highway Division  
21400 Ridgetop Circle  
Sterling, VA 20166

To receive consideration, written comments must be mailed no later than **February 28, 2004**. For more information, please call (703) 404-6282.



★ Location of public meeting

### PUBLIC WORKSHOP

When:  
Thursday, January 29, 2004  
6:30 PM to 8:30 PM

Where:  
Walt Whitman Middle School  
2500 Parkers Lane  
Alexandria, VA 22306



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Environmental Assessment  
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